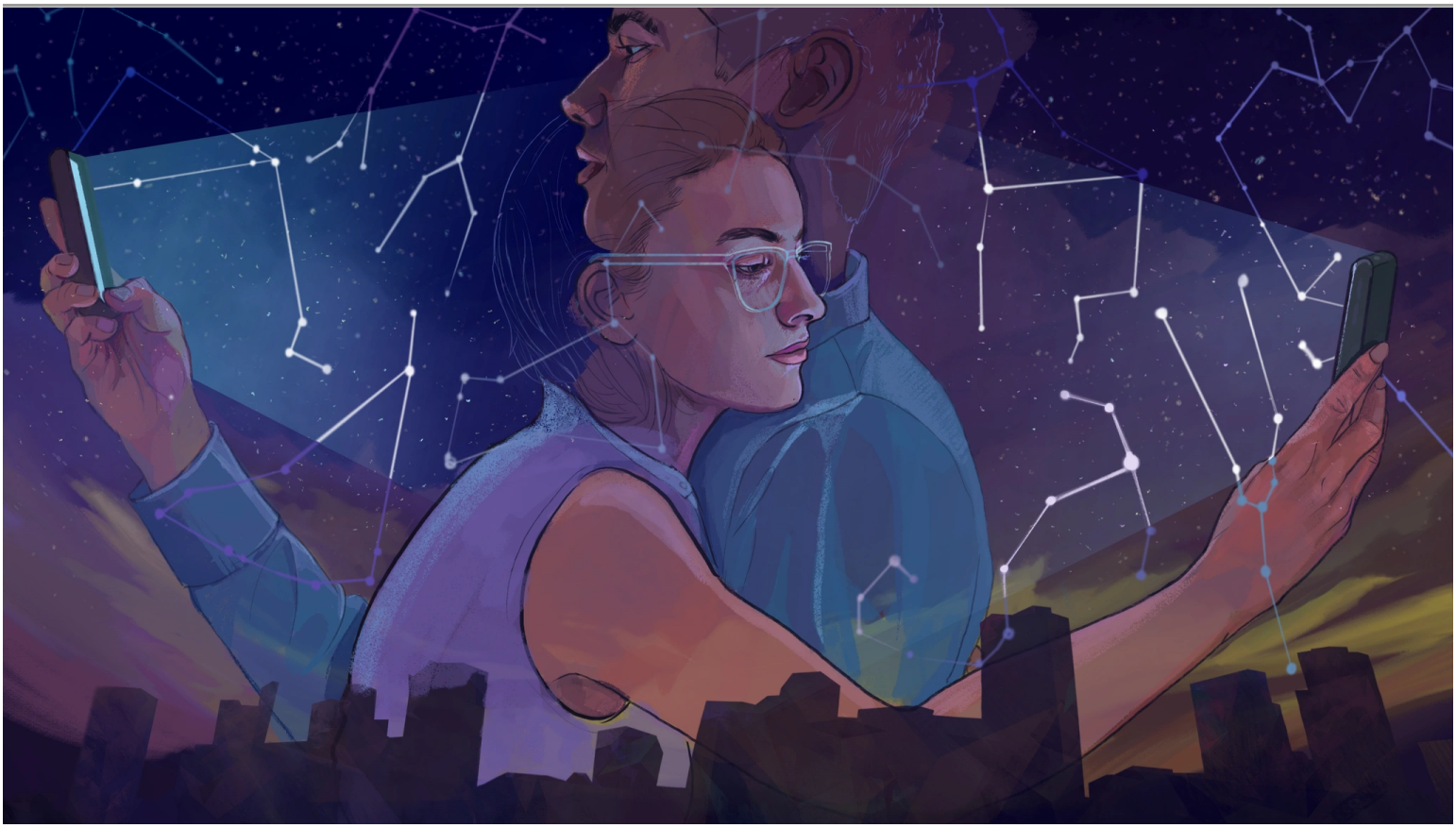

Maura Dwyer

HEALTH

THE NEW AGE OF ASTROLOGY

In a stressful, data-driven era, many young people find comfort and insight in the zodiac—even if they don't exactly believe in it.

By Julie Beck

Astrology is a meme, and it's spreading in that blooming, unfurling way that memes do. On social media, astrologers and astrology-meme machines amass tens or hundreds of thousands of followers, people joke about Mercury retrograde, and categorize "the signs as ..." literally anything: cat breeds, Oscar Wilde quotes, *Stranger Things* characters, types of french fries. In online publications, daily, weekly, and monthly horoscopes and zodiac-themed listicles flourish.

TheAtlantic – The New Age of Astrology - The Atlantic - Julie Beck

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This isn't the first moment astrology's had and it won't be the last. The practice has been around in various forms for thousands of years. More recently, the New Age movement of the 1960s and '70s came with a heaping helping of the zodiac. (Some also refer to the New Age as the "Age of Aquarius"—the 2,000-year period after the Earth is said to move into the Aquarius sign.)

In the decades between the New Age boom and now, while astrology certainly didn't go away—you could still regularly find horoscopes in the back pages of magazines—it "went back to being a little bit more in the background," says Chani Nicholas, an astrologer based in Los Angeles. "Then there's something that's happened in the last five years that's given it an edginess, a relevance for this time and place, that it hasn't had for a good 35 years. Millennials have taken it and run with it."

Many people I spoke to for this piece said they had a sense that the stigma attached to astrology, while it still exists, had receded as the practice has grabbed a foothold in online culture, especially for young people.

"Over the past two years, we've really seen a reframing of New Age practices, very much geared toward a Millennial and young Gen X quotient," says Lucie Greene, the worldwide director of J. Walter Thompson's Intelligence Group, which tracks and predicts cultural trends.

Callie Beusman, a senior editor at *Broadly*, says traffic for the site's horoscopes "has grown really exponentially." Stella Bugbee, the president and editor-in-chief of *The Cut*, says a typical horoscope post on the site got 150 percent more traffic in 2017 than the year before.

In some ways, astrology is perfectly suited for the internet age. There's a low barrier to entry, and nearly endless depths to plumb if you feel like falling down a Google-research hole. The availability of more in-depth information online has given this cultural wave of astrology a certain erudition—more jokes about Saturn returns, fewer "Hey baby, what's your sign?" pickup lines.

A quick primer: Astrology is not a science; there's no evidence that one's zodiac sign actually correlates to personality. But the system has its own sort of logic. Astrology ascribes meaning to the placement of the sun, the moon, and the planets within 12 sections of the sky—the signs of the zodiac. You likely know your sun sign, the most famous zodiac sign, even if you're not an astrology buff. It's based on where the sun was on your birthday. But the placement of the moon and each of the other planets at the time and location of your birth adds additional shades to the picture of you painted by your

“birth chart.”

> “The kids these days and their memes are like the perfect context for astrology.”

What horoscopes are supposed to do is give you information about what the planets are doing right now, and in the future, and how all that affects each sign. “Think of the planets as a cocktail party,” explains Susan Miller, the popular astrologer who founded the Astrology Zone website. “You might have three people talking together, two may be over in the corner arguing, Venus and Mars may be kissing each other. I have to make sense of those conversations that are happening each month for you.”

“Astrologers are always trying to boil down these giant concepts into digestible pieces of knowledge,” says Nicholas. “The kids these days and their memes are like the perfect context for astrology.”

Astrology expresses complex ideas about personality, life cycles, and relationship patterns through the shorthand of the planets and zodiac symbols. And that shorthand works well online, where symbols and shorthand are often baked into communication.

"Let me state first that I consider astrology a cultural or psychological phenomenon," not a scientific one, Bertram Malle, a social cognitive scientist at Brown University, told me in an email. But "full-fledged astrology"—that goes beyond newspaper-style sun-sign horoscopes—"provides a powerful vocabulary to capture not only personality and temperament but also life's challenges and opportunities. To the extent that one simply learns this vocabulary, it may be appealing as a rich way of representing (not explaining or predicting) human experiences and life events, and identifying some possible paths of coping."

People tend to turn to astrology in times of stress. A small 1982 study by the psychologist Graham Tyson found that "people who consult astrologers" did so in response to stressors in their lives—particularly stress "linked to the individual's social roles and to his or her relationships," Tyson wrote. "Under conditions of high stress, the individual is prepared to use astrology as a coping device even though under low-stress conditions he does not believe in it."

According to American Psychological Association survey data, since 2014, Millennials have been the most stressed generation, and also the generation most likely to say their stress has increased in the past year since 2010. Millennials and Gen Xers have been significantly more stressed than older generations since 2012. And Americans as a whole have seen increased stress because of the political tumult since the 2016 presidential election. The 2017 edition of the APA's survey found that 63 percent of Americans said they were significantly stressed about their country's future. Fifty-six percent of people said reading the news stresses them out, and Millennials and Gen Xers were

significantly more likely than older people to say so. Lately that news often deals with political infighting, climate change, global crises, and the threat of nuclear war. If stress makes astrology look shinier, it's not surprising that more seem to be drawn to it now.

Nicholas's horoscopes are evidence of this. She has around 1 million monthly readers online, and recently snagged a book deal—one of four new mainstream astrology guidebooks sold in a two-month period in summer 2017, according to Publisher's Marketplace. Anna Paustenbach, Nicholas's editor at HarperOne, told me in an email that Nicholas is "at the helm of a resurgence of astrology." She thinks this is partly because Nicholas's horoscopes are explicitly political. On September 6, the day after the Trump administration announced it was rescinding DACA—the deferred-action protection program for undocumented immigrants—Nicholas sent out her typical newsletter for the upcoming full moon. It read, in part:

> The full moon in Pisces ... may open the floodgates of our feelings. May help us to empathize with others ... May we use this full moon to continue to dream up, and actively work toward, creating a world where white supremacy has been abolished.

Astrology offers those in crisis the comfort of imagining a better future, a tangible reminder of that clichéd truism that is nonetheless hard to remember when you're in the thick of it: This too shall pass.

In 2013, when Sandhya was 32 years old, she downloaded the Astrology Zone app, looking for a road map. She felt lonely, and unappreciated at her

nonprofit job in Washington, D.C., and she was going out drinking four or five times a week. “I was in the cycle of constantly being out, trying to escape,” she says.

She wanted to know when things would get better and Astrology Zone had an answer. Jupiter, “the planet of good fortune,” would move into Sandhya’s zodiac sign, Leo, in one year’s time, and remain there for a year. Sandhya remembers reading that if she cut clutter out of her life now, she’d reap the rewards when Jupiter arrived.

So Sandhya spent the next year making room for Jupiter. (She requested that we not publish her last name because she works as an attorney and doesn’t want her clients to know the details of her personal life.) She started staying home more often, cooking for herself, applying for jobs, and going on more dates. “I definitely distanced myself from two or three friends who I didn’t feel had good energy when I hung around them,” she says. “And that helped significantly.”

Jupiter entered Leo on July 16, 2014. That same July, Sandhya was offered a new job. That December, Sandhya met the man she would go on to marry. “My life changed dramatically,” she says. “Part of it is that a belief in something makes it happen. But I followed what the app was saying. So I credit some of it to this Jupiter belief.”

A combination of stress and uncertainty about the future is an ailment for which astrology can seem like the perfect balm.

Humans are narrative creatures, constantly explaining their lives and selves by weaving together the past, present, and future (in the form of goals and expectations). Monisha Pasupathi, a developmental psychologist who studies narrative at the University of Utah, says that while she lends no credence to astrology, it "provides [people] a very clear frame for that explanation."

It does give one a pleasing orderly sort of feeling, not unlike alphabetizing a library, to take life's random events and emotions and slot them into helpfully labeled shelves. This guy isn't texting me back because Mercury retrograde probably kept him from getting the message. I take such a long time to make decisions because my Mars is in Taurus. My boss will finally recognize all my hard work when Jupiter enters my tenth house. A combination of stress and uncertainty about the future is an ailment for which astrology can seem like the perfect balm.

Sandhya says she turns to astrology looking for help in times of despair, "when I'm like, 'Someone tell me the future is gonna be okay.'" Reading her horoscope was like flipping ahead in her own story.

“I’m always a worrier,” she says. “I’m one of those people who, once I start getting into a book, I skip ahead and I read the end. I don’t like cliff-hangers, I don’t like suspense. I just need to know what’s gonna happen. I have a story in my head. I was just hoping certain things would happen in my life, and I wanted to see if I am lucky enough for them to happen.”

Now that they have happened, “I haven’t been reading [my horoscope] as much,” she says, “and I think it’s because I’m in a happy place right now.”

Maura Dwyer

For some, astrology’s predictions function like Dumbo’s feather—a comforting magic to hold onto until you realize you could fly on your own all along. But it’s the ineffable mystical sparkle of the feather—gentler and less draining than the glow of a screen—that makes people reach for it in the first place.

People are starting to get sick of a life lived so intensely on the grid. They wish for more anonymity online. They're experiencing fatigue with ebooks, with dating apps, with social media. They're craving something else in this era of quantified selves, and tracked locations, and indexed answers to every possible question. Except, perhaps the questions of who you really are, and what life has in store for you.

Ruby Warrington is a lifestyle writer whose New Age guidebook *Material Girl, Mystical World* came out in May 2017—just ahead of the wave of astrology-book sales this summer. She also runs a mystical esoterica website called The Numinous, a word that Merriam-Webster defines as meaning "supernatural or mysterious," but that Warrington defines on her website as "that which is unknown, or unknowable."

"I think that almost as a counterbalance to the fact that we live in such a quantifiable and meticulously organized world, there is a desire to connect to and tap into that numinous part of ourselves," Warrington says. "I see astrology as a language of symbols that describes those parts of the human experience that we don't necessarily have equations and numbers and explanations for."

J. Walter Thompson's Intelligence Group released a trend report in 2016 called "Unreality" that says much the same thing: "We are increasingly turning to unreality as a form of escape and a way to search for other kinds of freedom, truth and meaning," it reads. "What emerges is an appreciation for magic and spirituality, the knowingly unreal, and the intangible aspects of our lives that defy big data and the ultra-transparency of the web." This sort of reactionary cultural 180 has happened before—after the Enlightenment's

emphasis on rationality and the scientific method in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Romantic movement found people turning toward intuition, nature, and the supernatural. It seems we may be at a similar turning point. *New York Magazine* even used the seminal Romantic painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* to illustrate Andrew Sullivan's recent anti-technology essay, "I Used to Be a Human Being."

JWT, along with another trend-forecasting group, WGSN, in its report "Millennials: New Spirituality," lump astrology in with other New Age mystical trends that have caught on with young people in recent years: healing crystals, sound baths, and tarot, among others.

"I think it's become generally less acceptable to just arbitrarily shit on things as like 'that's not rational, or that's stupid because that's not fact,'" says Nicole Leffel, a 28-year-old software engineer who lives in New York.

Bugbee, the editor-in-chief of *The Cut*, noticed this shift a couple years ago. "I could just tell that people were sick of a certain kind of snarky tone," she said. Up to that point, the site had been running slightly irreverent horoscopes with gifs meant to encapsulate the week's mood for each sign. But Bugbee realized "that people wanted sincerity more than anything. So we just kind of went full sincere with [the horoscopes], and that's when we saw real interest happen."

But a sincere burgeoning interest in astrology doesn't mean people are wholesale abandoning rationality for more mystical beliefs. Nicholas Campion, a historian of astrology, points out that the question of whether people "believe" in astrology is both impossible to answer and not really a useful question to ask. People might say they don't "believe" in astrology but still identify with their zodiac sign. They may like to read their horoscope, but not change their behavior based on what it says. There is more nuance than this statistic allows for.

Many mainstream examinations of astrology as a trend are deeply concerned with debunking. They like to trot out the National Science Foundation survey that measures whether people think astrology is scientific and remind readers that it's not. Which, it's not. But that's not really the point.

While there are surely some people who blindly accept astrology as fact and view it as on par with a discipline like biology, that doesn't seem to be the case among many of the young adults who are fueling this renaissance of the zodiac. The people I spoke to for this piece often referred to astrology as a tool, or a kind of language—one that, for many, is more metaphorical than literal.

"Astrology is a system that looks at cycles, and we use the language of planets," says Alec Verkuilen Brogan, a 29-year-old chiropractic student based in the Bay Area who has also studied astrology for 10 years. "It's not like these planets are literally going around and being like 'Now, I'm going to do this.' It's a language to speak to the seasons of life."

> “We take astrology very seriously, but we also don’t necessarily believe in it. It’s just a way to look at the world.”

Michael Stevens, a 27-year-old who lives in Brooklyn, was in the quarter-life crisis season of life around the time of the total solar eclipse in August this year. “Traditionally, I’m a skeptic,” he says. “I’m a hard-core, like Dana Scully from *X-Files*, type of person. And then shit started to happen in life.” Around the time of the eclipse, in the course of his advertising work, he cold-called Susan Miller of Astrology Zone, to ask if she would put some ads on her site.

She was annoyed, he says, that he called her at the end of the month, which is when she writes her famously lengthy horoscopes. But then she asked him for his sign—Sagittarius. “And she’s like, ‘Oh, okay, this new moon’s rough for you.’” They talked about work and relationship troubles. (Miller doesn’t remember having this conversation specifically, but says “I’m always nice to the people who cold-call. It sounds totally like me.”)

Studies have shown that if you write a generic personality description and tell someone it applies to them, they’re likely to perceive it as accurate—whether that’s in the form of a description of their zodiac sign or something else.

Stevens says he could’ve potentially read into his conversation with Miller in

this way. “She’s like ‘You’re going through a lot right now,’” he says. “Who isn’t? It’s 2017.”

Still, he says the conversation made him feel better; it spurred him to take action. In the months between his call with Miller and our conversation in October, Stevens left his advertising job and found a new one in staffing. Shortly before we spoke, he and his girlfriend broke up.

“[I realized] I’m acting like a shitty, non-playable character in a Dungeons and Dragons RPG,” Stevens says, “so I should probably make choices, and pursue some of the good things that could happen if I just [cared] about being a happy person in a real way.”

Stevens’s story exemplifies a prevailing attitude among many of the people I talked to—that it doesn’t matter if astrology is real; it matters if it’s useful.

“We take astrology very seriously, but we also don't necessarily believe in it,” says Annabel Gat, the staff astrologer at *Broadly*, “because it’s a tool for self-reflection, it’s not a religion or a science. It’s just a way to look at the world and a way to think about things.”

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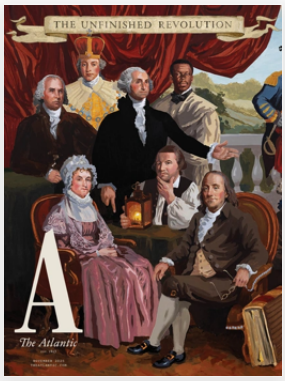

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